

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on Community Service Programs

June 30, 2009

The President. Thank you very much. Well, it is wonderful to see all these do-gooders in one room. [Laughter] And it is always a dangerous thing trying to follow Geoffrey Canada. [Laughter] But I thank you all for being here.

Withdrawal of U.S. Troops From Iraq

Before we begin the subject of today's gathering, I want to say a few words about an important milestone that we've reached in Iraq. Today American troops have transferred control of all Iraqi cities and towns to Iraq's Government and security forces. And this transition was agreed to last year as part of our status of forces agreement with the sovereign Iraqi Government. It's a part of our strategy to responsibly end the war by removing all American combat brigades from Iraq by next September and all of our troops from Iraq by the end of 2011.

So the Iraqi people are rightly treating this day as a cause for celebration. This is an important step forward, as a sovereign and united Iraq continues to take control of its own destiny. And with this progress comes responsibility. Iraq's future is in the hands of its own people, and Iraq's leaders must now make some hard choices necessary to resolve key political questions, to advance opportunity, and to provide security for their towns and their cities. In this effort, America will be a strong partner to the Iraqi people on behalf of their security and prosperity.

Now, make no mistake: There will be difficult days ahead. We know that the violence in Iraq will continue. We see that already in the senseless bombing in Kirkuk earlier today. And there are those who will test Iraq's security forces and the resolve of the Iraqi people through more sectarian bombings and the murder of innocent civilians. But I'm confident that those forces will fail. The future belongs to those who build, not those who destroy. And today's transition is further proof that those who have tried to pull Iraq into the abyss of disunion and civil war are on the wrong side of history.

Finally, the very fact that Iraqis are celebrating this day is a testament to the courage, the capability, and commitment of every single American who has served in Iraq. That's worth applauding. Through tour after tour of duty, our troops have overcome every obstacle to extend this precious opportunity to the Iraqi people. These women and men are not always in the headlines, but they're in our hearts and prayers, and we will forever honor their selfless service and sacrifice, as well as the service and sacrifice of their families. And there is more work to be done, but we've made important progress in supporting a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq. And everyone who's served there, both in uniform as well as our civilians, deserves our thanks.

Now, it's fitting that we're here today to talk about what each of us can do to lift up this Nation, because our troops' sacrifice challenges all of us to do what we can do to be better citizens. That's what the people that you've heard from already are doing every single day.

So I want to start off thanking Geoffrey Canada, Robert Chambers, Pat Christen—who's here with one of Hope Lab's student testers, Richard Ross—Richard, wave to everybody—[laughter]—for speaking with us about the extraordinary work their organizations are doing in

their communities. And I want to thank Richard and Vanessa Nunez for sharing their stories with us today. Thank you very much. You both clearly have very bright futures ahead of you.

I want to acknowledge our outstanding Education Secretary, Arne Duncan. He's worth giving a round of applause. As well as, if I'm not mistaken, Congressman Jim Moran is here. There he is, right here in the front, with his daughter Dorothy. I want to thank Steve Goldsmith for moderating. We were discussing the fact that at Harvard—Vanessa, you were there—how long ago was that? Fifteen years ago? We were together on a conference talking about this very issue. And so it's nice to see Steve, one of the outstanding mayors at the time and now continuing to do great work helping people to think about how we can all fulfill our civic responsibilities more effectively. So thank you very much.

I also want to thank Dave Cieslewicz—I want to make sure I say that properly—of Madison, Wisconsin, and Mayor Sara Presler of Flagstaff, Arizona, for their commitment as well. Please give them a big round of applause.

And finally, I want to thank all of you here today for everything you're doing to find new solutions to some of our oldest, toughest problems. I know what you do is not easy. I know that for many of you, the hours are long, the pay could be better—let's face it. But I also know the difference that each of you make. I know the lives that you change every single day. You teach us that there's no such thing as a lost cause if you're willing to be creative and challenge the conventional wisdom and take some risks; if you're willing to try, and fail, and then try again until you find something that works. And today I want to recognize that pioneering spirit and thank you all for the contributions that you're making to our communities.

What you all do is important in any year. But at this particular moment, when we're facing challenges unlike any we've seen in our lifetime, it's absolutely critical, because while we're working hard to rebuild our economy and help people who are struggling, let's face it, there's only so much that Washington can do. Government can't do everything and be everywhere, nor should it be.

For example, Government can help rebuild schools—and Arne Duncan is working as hard as anybody—but we need new ways to teach our children and train our teachers and get parents more involved in their children's education. Government can reform our health care system, but we need innovative approaches to help people manage their illnesses and lead healthier lives. Government can invest in clean energy, but we need new initiatives to get people to train for green jobs and make their homes and offices more energy-efficient.

So if anyone out there is waiting for Government to solve all their problems, they're going to be disappointed. Because ultimately, the best solutions don't come from the top-down, not from Washington, they come from the bottom-up in each and every one of our communities.

As some of you know, I first saw this years ago when I worked as a community organizer in Chicago—neighborhoods devastated by steel plant closings. And I spent hours going door to door, meeting with anyone who would talk to me, asking people about their struggles and what an organization could do to help. And it was slow, laborious going. We had plenty of setbacks and failed more often than we succeeded. But we listened to the people in the community and we learned from them and got them engaged and got them involved. And slowly, block by block, we began to turn those neighborhoods around, fighting for job training and better housing and more opportunity for young people.

The lesson I learned then still holds true today: That folks who are struggling don't simply need more Government bureaucracy; that top-down, one-size-fits-all program usually doesn't

end up fitting anybody. People don't need somebody out in Washington to tell them how to solve their problems, especially when the best solutions are often right there in their own neighborhoods, just waiting to be discovered.

So right now, in communities across America, people are hard at work developing and running programs that could be the next Harlem Children's Zone or the next Genesys Works or the next Hope Lab—and idealistic young people like Wendy Kopp who refused to listen to skeptics years ago and pushed ahead to bring her vision for Teach for America to life.

We've got young-at-heart people like Robert Chambers, who finish out careers in business or health care or education, and instead of transitioning into retirement, they're just too busy, they're too restless, so they come back for an encore, plowing a lifetime of experience into helping people in need. We've got people from all backgrounds, all walks of life succeeding where others have failed, getting real, measurable results, changing the way we think about some of our toughest problems.

The bottom line is clear: Solutions to America's challenges are being developed every day at the grass roots, and Government shouldn't be supplanting those efforts, it should be supporting those efforts. Instead of wasting taxpayer money on programs that are obsolete or ineffective, Government should be seeking out creative, results-oriented programs like the ones here today and helping them replicate their efforts across America.

So if the Harlem's Children's Zone can turn around neighborhoods in New York, then why not Detroit or San Antonio or Los Angeles or Indianapolis? If Bonnie CLAC can help working people purchase cars and manage their finances in New Hampshire, then they can probably do it in Vermont or all across New England or all across America.

Now, it's not going to be easy to scale up some of these great ideas. If it was easy, you would have already done it, and you wouldn't be here today—except maybe to just check out the White House. *[Laughter]* It's hard, but it's also critical. And it's absolutely possible, if we're willing to work together to give organizations like these the resources they need to reach their fullest potential and have their fullest impact, and if we're able to ensure that best practices are shared all across the country, that we've set up a strong network of ideas. And that's precisely the idea behind the \$50 million innovation fund included in the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, an initiative designed to assist community solutions like these that we're asking Congress to fund this year.

We're going to use this fund to find the most promising nonprofits in America. We'll examine their data and rigorously evaluate their outcomes. We'll invest in those with the best results that are most likely to provide a good return on our taxpayer dollars. And we'll require that they get matching investments from the private sector, from businesses and foundations and philanthropists, to make those taxpayer dollars go even further.

And today I'm announcing that I'll be asking Melody Barnes, who is our Director of the Domestic Policy Council, and our innovation team to lead this process, traveling across the country to discover and evaluate the very best programs in our communities.

And we won't just be looking at the usual suspects in the usual places. We won't just be seeking the programs that everybody already knows about, but we also want to find those hidden gems that haven't yet gotten the attention they deserve. And we'll be looking in all sorts of communities, rural, urban, and suburban, in every region of this country, because we know that great ideas and outstanding programs are everywhere, and it's up to us to find them.

We're going to take this new approach, this new way of doing business, Government-wide. So we've already set up a What Works Fund at the Department of Education—\$650 million in the Recovery Act that we'll be investing in the most successful, highest impact initiatives in our school districts and communities. It's not just going to be the usual formulas here. From pioneering teacher training programs and efforts to bring new technologies into our schools, to early learning programs and programs to help at-risk kids, these are the kinds of initiatives that Arne and his staff at the Department are looking to support.

At the Department of Health and Human Services, we're working on a new home-visiting initiative connecting nurses and other trained professionals with at-risk families to ensure that children get a healthy, safe, and smart start to life. We'll be seeking out the very best programs to achieve those goals—ones with the strongest record of success—and we'll test promising approaches to see what works and what doesn't.

So all of this represents a new kind of partnership between government and the nonprofit sector, but I can tell you right now, that partnership isn't complete and it won't be successful without help from the private sector. And that's why I'm glad that there are some deep pockets in the audience here—[laughter]—foundations, corporations, and individuals. You need to be part of this effort as well, and that's my challenge to the private sector today.

Our nonprofits can provide the solutions. Our Government can rigorously evaluate these solutions and invest limited taxpayer dollars in ones that work, but we need those of you from the private sector to step up as well. We need you to provide that critical seed capital to launch these ideas. We need you to provide those matching funds to help them grow, and we need you to serve as a partner, providing strategic advice and other resources to help them succeed. If we work together, if we all go all in here, think about the difference we can make. Think about the impact we could have with just the organizations represented in this room.

We've got Jim McCorkell here from Admission Possible, a group that helps promising young people from low-income families attend college. Ninety-nine percent of the Admission Possible class of 2008 got into college—99 percent. Where's Jim? Where's Jim? There he is, back there. The vast majority stay in college and earn their degrees. Admission Possible operates in just two States now. So imagine if it was 10 or 20 or 50.

We've got Alfa Demmellash here from Rising Tide Capital. Where is Alfa? Right over there. Did I pronounce your name right?

Alfa Demmellash. Yes, you did.

The President. Good. When your name is Barack Obama, you're sensitive to these things. [Laughter] So Alfa is with Rising Tide Capital, an organization that helps struggling mom-and-pop entrepreneurs get loans, run their businesses, and improve their profit margins. Seventy percent of their clients are single moms; all of them rely on their businesses to support their families. And so far Rising Tide has helped 250 businessowners in the State of New Jersey. So imagine if they could help 500 or 1,000 or more all across America.

If we empower organizations like these, think about the number of young people like Vanessa and Richard whose lives we can change, the number of families whose livelihoods we can boost, the number of struggling communities we can bring back to life.

In the end, that's what this effort is about. It's not about the old partisan lines in the sand. We know there's nothing Democratic or Republican about just doing what works. So we want to cast aside worn ideological debates and focus on what really helps people in their daily lives.

That's what each and every one of you are doing all across America. For that, I honor you, I thank you, and I look forward to working with you in the days and months and years ahead to address the urgent challenges of our time.

So thank you very much, everybody. Good luck.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:21 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Geoffrey Canada, president and chief executive officer, Harlem Children's Zone; Robert Chambers, president and cofounder, Bonnie CLAC; Pat Christen, president and chief executive officer, and Richard Ross, tester, Hope Lab; Vanessa Nunez, participant, Genesys Works; former Mayor Steve Goldsmith of Indianapolis, IN; Mayor Dave Cieslewicz of Madison, WI; Wendy Kopp, founder and chief executive officer, Teach for America; Jim McCorkell, founder and chief executive officer, Admission Possible; and Alfa Demmellash, founder and chief executive officer, Rising Tide Capital.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Community service programs.

Locations: Washington, D.C.

Names: Barnes, Melody; Canada, Geoffrey; Canada, Georffrey; Chambers, Robert; Christen, Pat; Cieslewicz, Dave; Demmellash, Alfa; Duncan, Arne; Goldsmith, Steve; Kopp, Wendy; McCorkell, Jim; Moran, Dorothy; Moran, James P.; Nunez, Vanessa; Presler, Sara; Ross, Richard.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Service and dedication ; Economy, national : American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009; Education : Parental involvement; Education : School improvement and renovation; Education : Teachers; Education : Technology and innovation, expansion efforts; Education, Department of : Secretary; Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies; Energy : Energy-efficient buildings; Health and medical care : Cost control reforms; Iraq : Democracy efforts; Iraq : Insurgency and terrorist attacks; Iraq : Reconciliation efforts; Iraq : Status of Forces Agreement with U.S.; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Teach for America; Voluntarism.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900521.